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THE HOME OF THE SOVEREIGN WEED

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ARE you a worshipper at the shrine of My Lady Nicotine? Have you offered incense with a real Havana? Performed the rite with all its proper ceremony—the tender removal of the fancy label with many misgivings as to whether the offending girdle has left its scar, the careful, deliberate clipping of the end, the final Promethean touch, the first ecstatic inhalation, the contented smile? But no, no smile, this is a serious business. If such has been your lot, and you are not an unworthy devotee, you have realized there is both truth and poetry in the line, “There’s peace in the Laranña,” that in the Laranña or any one of a dozen other brands unsung by Kipling from the Pearl of the Antilles, there is something not found in the baneful product of the average domestic factory.

Whence comes the delightful fragrance of the true Havana article, so different from the tarry odor so often met in the product of other lands? Why does the single isle of Cuba, but ninety miles off Key West, yield a plant unique, characteristic of itself alone? It is a fact, the theme of song and story. But why?

One hears it attributed to some mystic instinct of the grower or to the secret genius of the manufacturer. It is ascribed to the climate, to the soil, to the variety of the plant. I would not have the hardihood to deny all virtue to any of these. Doubtless each is a contributing factor, though they vary greatly in their contribution. But, in my opinion, the really effective agent has never been described. Others may not agree with me, and in truth the cause of such a fugitive, indefinite thing as quality in whatever pleases the eye, ear or palate is difficult to prove. I will give my version of the story; one may take it or leave it.

Four centuries have passed since the white race took up its burden in Cuba, four centuries of war rather lightly flecked with peace. But time has dealt kindly with the island. The American touch has of course improved its ideas of sanitation and education, but the people and their customs remain unaltered. It is true buccaneers no longer ply the Spanish Main,

and Spanish misrule—less bad than it is pictured, by the way—is no more; but the pirate still stands behind the counter of the city shop, and the free and independent citizen is fleeced in the same old way by his duly elected public representatives, to whom the city fathers of the same ilk in certain of our own cities might well go for instruction.

During this time the country has been a melting pot for more varied ores than even the United States. The population at the present time is something over three million. The census says seventy-one per cent. is white, a surprising thing to the visitor making his own observations until he learns that the obliging census-taker inquires of each whether he is white or black, and black indeed he must be if he does not reply *blanco*. The educated classes are largely of Spanish descent, of course, but in the mass of the population there is such an intricate mixture of Chinese, negro and Indian that one hesitates even to make a guess as to the origin of a particular individual. For this reason one can not characterize them as a people. They are too varied, physically, mentally and in disposition. Those of Spanish blood and even those having a considerable admixture of Chinese have a marked ability along the lines formerly accredited to the down-east Yankee. They are sharp, shrewd, observant and witty. It is a common saying that the Jew starves to death when within reach of their competition.

But since it is the barefooted inhabitant of the palm-thatched cottage, the representative of the common people, who raises most of the tobacco—indeed all of the tobacco of the finest quality—one can hardly impute to him either uncanny skill or hidden knowledge in bringing it to the forefront of the world's markets. Let us give the tiller of the soil the good word he deserves, for in many ways he is a lovable person, kindly and hospitable, but let us look elsewhere for the reasoning of our riddle.

On the other hand, some considerable credit for the excellence of their product does belong to both the Cuban manufacturer and his workman. The former, keenly alive to the value of a little hocus pocus with the American buyer, plays a very practical tune when he emphasizes the difference in flavor of each vintage, the varied quality of the product of the several districts, or the care with which each blend is made, with a polite but condescending intimation that the way he does it is beyond the ken of ordinary mortals. As a matter of fact, there is a modicum of charlatanry in tobacco judging as in wine judg-

ing or anything else of similar type where personal equation is so great. The Cuban manufacturer does take the necessary time to finish every process, no matter how much is required—something his American rival does not always do—but to believe he has kept any business secrets to himself requires more perfect faith than I possess.

But the Cuban cigar maker, that is another thing. He is a master-craftsman, an artist. *His* product is not hammered together like that of the American workman, who bunches his filler carelessly, hides his misdeeds in a binder of no special size or thickness, and finally courts ruin by crushing the whole thing in a mould. Instead, he actually builds his *tobacco*, as the Spanish call it, piece by piece, carefully spreading one small leaf around the other and manipulating them deftly with a single hand, till, perfect in shape and size, it is ready for the wrapper. When, with some paternal pride, he holds it up for final inspection, one can hardly repress an exclamation of admiration at the exactness with which it matches its fellow. Truly in this case the laborer is worthy of his hire.

Were it not that we have somewhat overstated the case of the workman in the states, one might suppose that the key to the problem lay here. But though probably seventy-five per cent. of the American cigars are abominations concocted of the mould and binder, still there are numerous factories working after the Cuban model without obtaining the Cuban result. We must look further.

The climate of Cuba is wonderful, perhaps the most wonderful in the world. No ice, no snow, no wintry blasts. Sometimes a January *norte* bringing a temperature of 50° F. makes the inhabitants pull their garments closer, but the mercury rarely sinks lower. It is continuous spring. No sticky, humid Florida weather, just delightful bracing air somewhere between 70° and 90° in the shade. In the sun it *is* hot; but it is a comfortable, refreshing sort of heat, the kind we in the north get on one or two days in June, when there is wholesome contentment in just basking there carefree and indifferent.

It may be that climatic conditions loom large in the matter of perfecting their tobacco. It is known that an even temperature and a relatively constant humidity are necessary factors for the foundation of high-quality leaf. Their control furnishes the reason for the immense sums spent in Florida and Connecticut on the cotton cloth under which is produced the so-called shade-grown types. And further, it must be an immense advantage on the manufacturing end to be able to handle

the cured product at any and all times without being continually on the jump to approach correct conditions by supplying artificial heat and moisture. To be sure, Tampa and Key West have similar climatic conditions, while, with all due regard for the proprieties, their cigars are still those of Tampa and Key West; but we must remember that these manufacturing centers seldom have to deal with a high-grade Cuban leaf, so that a fair comparison can not be made even on the manufacturing end and none at all as to the effect of climate on production of the natural leaf.

But what can we tie to in all this? The grower, the manufacturer, the workman, do their bit, as one might say; the wonderful climate is a mighty factor; nevertheless, as efficient causes of Cuba's preeminence in tobacco, they are not convincing. And varietal difference can be left out of consideration, for the Cuban varieties have been smuggled out again and again and tested in every country under the sun. The answer is that we have considered everything but the "hoyo," and the *hoyo*, the "hole" made by Nature in their limestone cliffs, is the efficient cause. You will recognize the term in the name of the celebrated brand "Hoyo de Monterey," cigars made originally from tobacco grown in the *hoyo* of Monterey. These limestone pits are Cuba's secret, the home of the really fine product. Cuba raises much other good tobacco, and, to tell the truth, much tobacco in her eastern provinces about which the least said the better, but the *hoyos* are the workshops for Nature's best. Why they are but seldom visited by the Havana nicotine magnates and known only by rumor to American tobacco men, I do not know, but I have recently had the pleasure of making a personal pilgrimage to two of the most famous spots and was told there that I was one of the first Americans to make the trip.

We left Havana, three of us, about 6:30 in the morning in a Henry Ford production, fortified only by a single cup of *cafe con leche*, that peculiarly flavored coffee that is really a Cuban institution. We were driven clickety-clack by one of those reckless corner-cutting chauffeurs with which Havana is infested, whose almond eyes betrayed an ancestor from the Celestial Kingdom in the not too distant past, and who nearly brought us to grief at the first turn by running into a native who was trying to get some speed out of his Andalusian mule by screaming, while wielding the goad, "I will beat thee! I will beat thee! If thy skin were that of a holy Saint, still would I beat thee!" Luckily we missed him and sped out into the highway

to Pinar del Rio with grins on our faces and curses in our ears.

Though with marvellous ingenuity the infernal chauffeur jolted us squarely through each unevenness in the road, we felt that the trip was "not too bad" as the Cubans have it, when we flashed out from under a long avenue of royal poincianas loaded with their giant beans and our eyes met the fascinating outline of the distant mountains, across long plains dotted with feathery plumes of the royal palm.

We breakfasted, a typical Cuban breakfast of six or eight courses, at San Diego de los Baños in a wonderful inn some centuries old, then on to Pinar del Rio, the center of the tobacco district. From here our way wound up through shale mountains covered with dwarf pines, as different a scene from that of the morning as well might be. Typical Virginia hills they were, and if rifts in the rocks and turns in the road had not given us glimpses of the tropical verdure below, we should have thought we had suddenly been transported there on Suleiman's magic carpet in the moments we had nodded from the effects of somnoric old Sol.

Down again and up like the King of France with his ten thousand men, thirty miles beyond Pinar del Rio we reached our goal, San Carlos del Valle de Luis Lazo, perched on a little plateau at the foot of the limestone cliffs of the Sierra del Camo. Here, thanks to the hospitality of the "squire" of the little village, good old Don Andres Carvallo, we spent the night, and were ready early the next morning for our trip to two of the *hoyos*, Hoyo Valteso and Hoyo Martel, for each of the thousand or so of these places has its individuality marked with a name of its own.

As the cliffs seemed to rise absolutely vertically some four or five hundred feet, there was some speculation as to our ability to make the climb, but we were assured by Higinio, our native guide, that he would take us up one of the easy trails—one used for many years by oxen. As we plodded up the narrow, twisting, stony path, rising at an angle of fully sixty degrees in places, our respect for the climbing ability of the ox increased. In response to our questions, Higinio informed us that it took at least a year to train each ox, schooling him in his task by placing him between two *practicos* that had previously learned their trade. In other *hoyos*, those really isolated by the steepness of the cliffs, they are carried in when quite small calves, and spend their whole lives there before the plow and harrow.

As the top was reached and we peered down, between the trunks of the *palmas de los sierras*, and the branches of the

ceibas covered with bromeliads and an occasional orchid, we caught our first glimpse of the *hoyo*, a pit in the limestone rock, apparently the crumbling remnant of a cave with the top fallen in. It seemed to cover about an acre, though in reality it was eight times as large. The level floor was dotted with green spots which we knew must be tobacco, though we could have hazarded no such guess from its size, and at one side the curing barn, a palm-thatched affair about fifty by twenty feet, where the leaves are hung to dry before being packed into the odd little palm-covered bundles ready for their journey to the Havana market. The picture was a gorgeous riot of color under the tropical sun, but even so, there was not that peculiar feeling of awe which came when we had cautiously picked our way down and obtained the view from the floor. I have sought for a simile, but have not found it. The *hoyo* is a thing unique. Imagine a prison of limestone cliffs towering abruptly five hundred feet. Above, the southern sun peeping from a cloud-bank of fleecy white, as if inquiring the reason for this third American intervention. At right, at left, in front, behind, the bleak wall, with only here and there a famished palm or green-barked *ceibón* struggling for a foothold, or perhaps a clump of fern and moss screening a soft-voiced dove or a black-coated wrangling Jew bird, the echoes of whose vocal aspirations resounded back and forth. Below, the tidy garden with drooping rows of green broken at times by a spot of pink where a Cuban nettle flaunts its flag of warning. Surely it is a garden of gnomes, where nightly they water their seedlings with a magic essence, coaxing them to distil the fragrance in their leaves, that dead and gone they may fulfill their appointed lot in bringing solace and contentment to the tired business man—really given away at three for a dollar gold, in Havana.

The tobacco, botanically speaking, was in no way different from the same variety grown in Connecticut. There was the same habit of growth, the same shaped leaf, the typical flower. Only the size was something new to our experience. It was dwarf, tobacco in miniature, two feet high at most, with seven or eight delicate little leaves scarcely long enough for a man's size cigar. We saw none of the cured product, but were assured that the yield was about 300 pounds per acre in a good year, and (with considerable pride) "the price, Señor, one dollar and a half a pound at the plantation." When we thought of the 1,800-pound yields of the same variety on the level fields of Connecticut, and glanced at the towering cliffs, emblems of the difficulties here encountered, we wondered why the price was

not multiplied by twenty, although, as a matter of fact, it was greatly in excess of that obtained on the island for other tobacco.

We stopped a moment on our way back at a *semillaro*, a place cleared near the top of the limestone cliff for raising seedlings for the *hoyo*. This is done, we were told, because fungus attacks are less likely at the higher altitude. Rather an unkempt place it was, with here and there a yam or taro plant showing that the workmen did not forget their own wants in the midst of their labors.

Back to Luis Lazo and a midday breakfast to which we were duly attentive. Afterwards a visit to several *ensenadas*, tobacco plantations outside the *hoyos* where a primitive sort of irrigation is used. Open troughs radiate from a platform at the water's source—in this case a river—and a patient old nag hour after hour hoists a laden barrel to the center of distribution, a hogshead reservoir some fifteen feet up. The tobacco here was larger and from the agricultural point of view much finer than that in the *hoyo*. The plants were three or even three and a half feet in height and the ten or twelve leaves, characteristic of them, were sometimes sixteen inches long. They were just in the midst of the picking, and we saw leaves in various stages of drying, hanging in the different barns. These buildings, if such they can be called, interested us very much. I do not know whether it has any effect on the quality of the product, but it is clear that these affairs with their long sloping roofs of palm leaves through which the air can pass at any point are ideal for the purpose for which they are intended, provided no torrential rains occur at the wrong season of the year and start the half-cured leaves to rotting. One other thing here was not without its attraction to our northern eyes, as illustrating the efficient use these people back in the mountains make of their natural resources. We were already aware that the royal palm might as aptly be called the people's palm, since it furnishes the Cuban with his entire habitation, with part of his furniture and clothing and, through the intermediation of his pig, with food, yet here was another valuable use right in line with our inquiry. The *tercios* or bundles of tobacco are so neatly packed away in palm-leaf envelopes that they undergo a perfect case-curing and reach the Havana factory practically ready for use. And further, the *tercios* are bound with a native rope, a product of another tree right at hand, the *ceibón*. A very good rope it makes, as strong as hemp and not half so troublesome to prepare.

Regretfully we tore ourselves away from the magic attractions of the mountains and sped to Havana. We had had a glorious trip, a trip of real discovery, one might say, and were duly thankful for the memories we carried with us. Pleasant they were, though rather disconcerting after there was time for thought. We had seen the *hoyo*, the one place in the world where they raise perfect tobacco. But had we pried into Cuba's secret, after all? Again and again came the question, why does the *hoyo* raise perfect tobacco? There is no question about the fact; the manufacturers admit it; the growers take pride in it. The price proves it. If more conclusive proof is wanted, it comes from the *hoyos* themselves. Would such a place as the Hoyo Palenque, surrounded by cliffs over a thousand feet high and reached by seventy separate ladders, have been cultivated for over a hundred years if it did not produce a superfine product? There is but one answer to this, but the reason is not so easy. I believe I have unriddled the riddle, but mark that I only say "believe."

The limestone cliffs give their aid of course, since tobacco must have a slightly alkaline soil. But then lime is not a scarce article in this world of ours and its effects can be duplicated elsewhere. Again, there is the sterility of the peculiar type of sandy soil which makes up Cuba's good tobacco land. It may have unique chemical properties that contribute to the end result. Since they have never been studied carefully, one can not say, but this does not seem a necessary assumption. The fact that there is that agricultural ideal, a perfect climate, backed up by a sterile soil of proper physical constituency, is all that is necessary to account for the generally excellent tobacco of certain areas of the celebrated Vuelta Abajo. Doesn't it seem like an agricultural paradox to attribute the excellence of a product to the sterility of the soil? It is the truth, however. Several years ago it was found that a tobacco plant produces about the same quantity of the essential oils that give the leaves their aroma no matter whether certain of the conditions under which it is grown be good or bad. In other words, if a plant grows to be eight feet high and has leaves twenty-six inches long, it produces only about the same amount of essential oils as when it grows two feet high and has leaves eight inches long, other things being equal. Now it is a noteworthy fact that while Cuban tobacco under shade in Connecticut meets the first of these conditions, the average Cuban plant hardly approaches the second. The Cuban plant is a dwarf, and packs into its small self as much of the essentials of real

quality as its giant sister in Connecticut. Here again, however, our interpretation fits Cuban tobacco in general. The conditions are met just as neatly in the *ensenada* as they are in the *hoyo*, so we still seem far off the mark. This is not the whole story, for we must remember that the *hoyo* has and uses all these advantages as a basis upon which to build its own perfecting qualities.

The *hoyo* itself is the secret of the matter. Why do they grow tobacco under shade in Connecticut, Florida and even Cuba? Simply because it conserves moisture and keeps the temperature and humidity constant and high. This the *hoyo* does naturally with its limestone cliffs, having withal the immense advantage of direct rays of the sun at a considerable altitude, factors known to be essential to other crops besides tobacco. And it has the sun when it needs it, enough and no more. From ten o'clock until three it shines directly on the plants, storing up food in the leaves for elaboration during the night, while from dawn until ten and from three until seven, there is indirect light due to the protecting cliffs. It is a stage setting that could not be more admirable from the standpoint of plant physiology, a perfect fulfillment of what are known to be the conditions required by the tobacco plant.

The reason why other countries can not compete with Cuba in producing the fragrant weed, therefore, is not so difficult to see. They may improve their methods of cultivation and manufacture, select carefully their soils and climate, may even imitate conditions artificially with tents and tent-poles; but they can not hope to duplicate the finest product until they find a wizard genius who can transport the ancient *hoyos* far beyond the sea, and train the sun to obey his word as did Joshua of old.